The Human Equation

September 8, 1991
8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois

Scripture:
Romans 7:15-25
Matthew 16:13-20

"What are human beings that you are mindful of them...?"
—Psalm 8:4 (NRSV)

"...you are Peter, and on this rock I will build..."
—Matthew 16:18 (NRSV)

In the top right-hand drawer of my desk there is a box of small cards - perhaps a thousand of them. In elegantly raised print, the little cards announce who I am, in terms of the institution for which I work, along with its address and telephone number. If the truth were known, there are other boxes of these small cards, reposing in remote corners of personal files, some of them now yellowing with age. These cards announce who I used to be. Business cards. You might conclude that we can never have too many of them, or at least that we regard the act of discarding one's old business cards to be too significant to do precipitously.

They are occasionally useful. We leave them on the table in a hospital room when the patient is away, having further tests. They make great bookmarks. If your handwriting is tiny you can use the back of your business card for a short grocery list, or to communicate with the person sitting beside you at the symphony concert or in church.

I have in my wallet business cards I have received in ritual card exchanges with people I have long since forgotten but who, at the moment, seemed important to remember.

Sometimes simply having a business card seems to document one's personal identity. A young bride I know was proudly showing her new business cards weeks before the wedding because they bore her new name. Comedian Stan Freberg used the notion in a clever commercial he made for the Presbyterian Church years ago, about the man whose name was only penciled on his business card.

Robert Fulghum has fun with the notion of business cards and personal identity. Iconoclast that he is, he resists being defined only in terms of how he gets money, which is pretty much what a business card does. His wife called him a prince one morning and so he considered a business card - Robert Fulghum - Prince.

And he pokes fun at the whole culture for its absolute commitment to the notion that who you are is what you do.

Have you ever been on a plane or train and just for the fun of it wanted to tell your inquisitive seat mate that you were a test pilot or a ballet dancer? Fulghum has done it. Trying to discourage conversation he replied to the woman beside him that he was a janitor, only to discover that she was the publisher of a janitorial supply catalog and wanted his opinion on various cleansers and floor waxes. Another time he told the distinguished Thai gentlemen with whom he was sitting on a Bangkok flight that he was a neuro-surgeon. "Splendid" said the man. "So am I." That necessitated a full confession and prompted a lot of laughter. [It Was Fire When I Lay Down On It, p. 63]

We are the only creatures who worry about it, think about, fuss over it. Who are we? What are we? Who am I? What does it mean to be part of this race called human?

John Calvin who said that the question of God, is always also the human question. In our century Karl Barth echoed: The question of God and the human question, "Who is God? Who are we?" are two sides of the same question. The argument goes like this: If God is God - totally other, high and inaccessible, above and beyond all that we are - then we can never know God in the same way that we know what time it is, or the color of the sky or the sum of 2 plus 3. What we know is what we experience. And so, theology is always, therefore, anthropology. It is about God, but it is also about us in that all it can discuss is human experience of God. When the late Reinhold Niebuhr set out to write his systematic theology - he titled the book The Nature and Destiny of Man.

The human equation... Who are we? Who am I?

We are at least an enigma to ourselves. We are Albert Schweitzer, Adolph Hitler, Mother Teresa and Joseph Stalin, Michael Jordan and Manuel Noriega, Yitzale Pearlman and Donald Trump. And in addition to producing these wildly different expressions of our humanity, each of us - individually - can be improbably different people.

In a book he wrote several years ago, best selling philosopher/author, Sam Keen, put the enigma of our humanity into a delightful autobiographical story:"

"We crossed Court Street and climbed through a hole in the fence, leaving God, good manners, cleanliness, and all the polite virtues of Presbyterian children behind. The moment we were in the trees, out of sight of home, we became pagans. A short way down the path we stopped, pulled out our stolen pack of Camels and lit up. And coughed. All morning we worked on our fort... Mid-afternoon our domain was invaded by a party of picnickers. We became Indians and stalked the unwary, stealing two egg salad sandwiches and a cake when they were not looking. After that we dammed up the creek, went swimming. When the sun went down, we climbed back through the fence, checked to see if our breath still smelled of tobacco, put on the mask of civility, and went home for dinner." [The Passionate Life, p. 46]

We are an enigma - a paradox the definition of which is - two contradictory statements, both of which are true. We know this about ourselves... sometimes it frightens us. We are capable of loving each other with exquisite tenderness and patience. And we are capable of hurting each other with appalling ease. We are capable of heroic self-sacrifice and petty selfishness. In that wonderful passage from Romans 7, Paul put it memorably. "I do not understand my own actions... for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

The first story in the Bible uses images which are rich in paradox... We are, according to Genesis, the crown of God's creation... created in God's very image, given the power to name the other creatures... the responsibility for creation. We are the managing partners... But we are also the ones who can't obey the rules and when caught try to blame the others. We are God's image, but we are also fashioned out of the dirt, the rich, fertile, humus. God fashions us out of the stuff of the earth, and blows our spirit into us. We are, according to Genesis, mud creatures with, of all things, God's breath in us. We are the creatures who, when we find ourselves staring up into the deep recesses of a night sky - always say two things: "O Lord how majestic is thy name" and "who in the world are we?"

One of the theological and literary treasurers of our century is a collection of Letters and Papers Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his Nazi prison cell prior to his execution in 1945. Very near the end he wrote a poem: "Who Am I?":

"Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cell's confinement
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
Like a squire from his country-house.
Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak to my warders
Freely and friendly and clearly,
Who am I?
Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
Struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,
Yearning for colours,
Thirsting for words of kindness...
Weary and empty at praying...
Who am I? This or the other?"

Every generation answers the eternal question in a way which reflects the spirit - or soul - of that particular time. T. S. Eliot wrote a poem that seemed to capture the 1920s: The Hollow Men

"We are the hollow men

We are the stuffed men

Leaning together

Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!

After the crash and in the middle of the Depression architects of the New Deal wanted to encourage and inspire a more hopeful definition of humankind. Their answer may be viewed in the public art sponsored by the government. Do you recall those wonderful Post Office murals? I used to love to go there with my parents when they purchased stamps or mailed a package, to see those great paintings of muscular pioneers and their handsome wives and robust children and their Conestoga Wagons pushing their way over the Pennsylvania mountains, and strong coal miners and steel workers... That optimistic definition carried us through a World War and was the spiritual foundation for putting a man on the moon. And it is precisely that high view of humanity - capable of anything - which Tom Wolfe caricatured in the fabulously wealthy, high rolling trader - Masters of the Universe, they called themselves, whose life and soul and self slowly comes unraveled in Bonfire of the Vanities.

The low view - the mud ball without God's breath - is proposed by the Freudians who believed that we are the product of subconscious drives, mostly repressed... or the Marxists whose philosophy of economic determinism reduced human beings to faceless cogs in the larger gears of the society and whose intellectual, political, economic and spiritual bankruptcy is now evident... and the disciples of B. F. Skinner who teach that it's all programmed in your DNA and freedom of will is a massive illusion. The low view is perhaps most popularly seen in the emergence of the "victim" in popular thought. We are all victims of some abuse, some "ism," some oppression... so none of us is responsible for what happens. We are caught in systems so complex - that the best we can come up with - to cope with 120 murders per month, an urban society at war with itself, is to blame someone else, buy another pad lock and avoid certain neighborhoods after dark.

The current crisis in the human equation is the temptation not to think too highly about ourselves but the temptation to take the low view. Talking about the crisis in public integrity - what happened at Salomon Bros. for instance. British theologian, John V. Taylor, put it this way:

"Drab infidelities are committed not because too little power is available to us, but because the power so far exceeds the petty scale we want to live by. He (God) has made us a little less than the angels (gods) while our highest ambition is to be a little above the Joneses." [The Go Between God, p. 48]

And on this side of the Atlantic, Canadian Douglas John Hall:

"We have become small and there is no undergirding greatness to give our smallness any glory." [The Steward, p. 89]

And the story is told about Thomas Huxley - hurrying out of his house one day to deliver a lecture on evolution: "Where are you going in such a hurry?" a neighbor asked. Huxley called back - "To tell people they are all apes!" Loren Eisely commented: "It's easy to convince people they are monkeys. The difficult thing is to convince them that they are human beings."

The scriptural answer, the Judeo/Christian contribution to this most elemental of questions, "Who Are We?" is provocative. We are God's. We belong to God. The evolutionary answer that we are the latest in the process of natural selectivity which has been unfolding for billions of years, is a spectacular truth but it is not the whole truth. The DNA answer is an incredible discovery, but it does not exhaust the truth about us. There are bits and pieces of truth about us in Freud, Marx, and Skinner. We are money earners, consumers, accumulators, breathers, and sleepers and love makers and music makers and weapons makers... none of which contains the enigmatic, paradoxical reality of our humanity. And perhaps the best of all is the oldest of all - earth creatures, made of humus - mud - with God's breath in us.

But the most important thing the scripture tradition says about the human equation is that it is not theoretical - but existential. Who we are? Who you are? is not finally determined at the end of a vigorous discussion, or even a brilliant sermon - rather who you are is established in the decisions you make every day... the commitments, the causes which touch your heart and which call out your passion, your courage, your love.

If you watch little children you will occasionally see them reach deep inside themselves in order to do something they never did before and aren't sure they are capable of doing - like taking a first step... They are wonderful moments - holy moments. Pharoah Rivers, the young hero of Alex Kotlowitz's superb book, <u>There Are No Children Here</u>, rising above the hell in which he and his family live in the Henry Horner homes in Chicago, rising above the filth and poverty and murder of his friends, and the drug addiction of his father and arrest of his cousin and brother - rising above his constant terror and his stutter to win a spelling bee and to deliver a brief oration at his elementary school graduation perfectly. The little boy or girl, at bat with the bases loaded, bottom of the last inning, one run behind with parents screaming, and teammates pleading, who suddenly shuts it all out, and squares shoulders and jaw, reaches down inside to find the self in there and does something he or she has never done before - hits the ball...

Were you as gripped as I was with the newspaper reports of those brave Russians who built the barricades!... the 47 year-old geology teacher standing shoulder to shoulder with much younger men and women behind the pathetic barricade in front of the Russian Parliament - a pile of two by fours and rusty pipe and couches and garbage cans - staring down the barrel of a tank canon... When it was over a Western reporter asked him why he did that and he said "A man sooner or later has to decide who he is... I decided who I was a long time ago, but just now had the chance to show it."

We decide to be - we answer the question - "Who Am I?" not in meditation or prayer or the silent recesses of our spirits - but in commitments. We become fully human in the choices we make.

And - this - we become fully human in encounter with our God. "We do not know ourselves truly except as we know ourselves confronted by God." Reinhold Niebuhr said in the middle of his magnificent tome... and it really sounds like a confession of faith. In the mystery of confrontation with the one who created us - we become fully human.

And so it was one day Jesus, with his disciples, asked them who other people were saying he was. And when they answered, he asked who they said he was.... And the subject of this inquiry seems to be him - his identity... "Who do you say that I am?" And I will return to the passage next week and explore that. But may I propose this morning that another way to understand that familiar encounter between Jesus and Peter - is as that confrontation which calls forth the person, the encounter with God - in the person of Jesus of Nazareth - which forces a man to become a human being, fully and passionately, as never before.

"Blessed are you Simon - You are Peter - on this rock I will build."

Bonhoeffer's poem Who Am I concludes powerfully -

"Who Am I? This or the other
Am I one person to-day and to-morrow another?
Am I both at once? ...
Who Am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!"

And so the question comes to each of us... the encounter with our Lord who in the midst of human life meets us - and sometimes it is a moment of awe, staring up at the heavens and sometimes it is a tough ethical choice, and sometimes it is the overwhelmingly passionate depth of our love, and sometimes, I think it is a moment like this - sitting in a pew on a Sunday morning and he asks - "Who do you say that I am?" which is always a way of asking - "Who are you? Who will you be? Who will you become?"

And always he says - You are Peter - you are Bob - you are Don, Jane, Margaret, John. You are Paul and Mary and George...

You are the image of God. You have God's breath in you. You are mine and I love you. I will live through you - and on you I will build my kingdom on earth.